

Medievalisms of Moral Panic: Borrowing the Past to Frame Fear in the Present

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This essay argues that understanding both the process by which medievalism tropes feature in the formation of moral panics and the manner in which medievalists are drawn into the debate reveals much about the imagination of the medieval in the shaping of the modern, and also some salient points relating to role of scholars in public discourse. It would be glib and unhelpful to promote the message that medievalists are making moral-panic medievalisms worse, nor would it be true. The power to analyze and critique the circumstances by which medievalisms become intertwined with the symbolism of moral-panic phenomena is valuable indeed. Nor is any scholarly call for historical accuracy ever in vain.

Academic contributions to the debate serve to encourage greater recognition of the essential normality and humanity of many seemingly alien behaviors. Just as there is a struggle to recognize the inherent socio-cultural inequalities that fuel displays of social unrest in the present, so too must we struggle to promote a message that medieval peoples are not wholly alien, irrational, or Other – although different and

often confrontational – and cannot be unscrupulously bent to twenty-first-century ends.

We live in a time in which unprecedented globalization, cultural change, and fluidity of ideas have created much anxiety and uncertainty about the present and the future. In the face of new fears, it is common to shape discourse by reaching into the past for sense-making tropes and idioms. It is within this context that culturally specific and complex moral panics take place. These panics require fuel, and the queerly atemporal imagined Middle Ages has repeatedly been added to the fire.¹ The results are often erratic and internally inconsistent: as Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl have argued, “medievalism in political discourse fluctuates in its effects, and contemporary medievalisms in politics exemplify these disjointed strategies.”² A particularly complex and politically germane manifestation occurs when a phenomenon that I will term “moral-panic medievalism” appears.

In his seminal monograph *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Stanley Cohen defines the moral panic as “a condition, episode, person or group of persons [who] become defined as a threat to societal values and interests.”³ The notion of the folk devil is rooted in the interpretation of the pre-modern, drawing inspiration from the imagery of Puritan witch hunts, the actions of the Spanish Inquisition, and incidents of popular fear of dualist heresies such as Catharism and Bogomilism. In Cohen’s

¹ For a thorough treatment of the queerness of medieval time, see Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

² Tison Pugh and Anna Jane Weisl, “Political Medievalisms: The Darkness of the Dark Ages,” in *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 140–157 (146). See 144–146 for an illustrative discussion of Sarah Palin’s 2008 use of the term “blood libel,” its backfire, and the ensuing discourse.

³ Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and the Rockers* (London: Routledge, 1987, 3rd edn), 9.

formulation, fear in the present must always be influenced by “folk devils of the past, to whom current horrors can be compared.”⁴

When the putative stability of the body politic is threatened, an immune reaction seeks out the imagined origin of disruption. The phenomenon of moral panic is as diverse as the cultural contexts in which it is expressed, and is framed by the mores of those involved.⁵ The intriguing reality of this process is that the historical accuracy of comparison becomes distorted, troubling medievalists with popular perceptions that are not amenable to traditional scholarly arguments.

The Formation of Moral Panic

Sometimes the object of the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society itself conceives itself.⁶ – Stanley Cohen

Before progressing further, a description of moral panic is in order. Erich Goode has argued that a moral panic is not a “theory,” but a sociological phenomenon. The most crucial aspect in the study of it, according to Goode, is the extent to which such phenomena can be understood to have real-world referents, and the extent to which

⁴ A great deal of Cohen’s folk-devil thesis is based on Kai T. Erikson’s book *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1966), a study of deviance through the seventeenth-century Puritan Settlement of Massachusetts. Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 3.

⁵ It is also a concept with a rich history that I have attempted to give justice to in this essay. For a survey, see Chas Critcher, “Moral Panic Analysis: Past, Present and Future,” *Sociology Compass* 2/4 (2008): 1127–44.

⁶ Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 1.

these referents manifest “interesting and revealing patterns in social life.”⁷ They follow a distinct series of phases, a chain reaction from threat to discourse. Moral panic is contagious, potent, and an expression of a fundamental human societal drive. To my mind, it represents a societal immune response to putative or actual threat or contamination. Just like the human immune system, this process is often subverted, and lacks discrimination. When two of what Critcher describes as the “five Ps” – Politicians, Pressure groups, Police, Press, and Public – unite behind a moral panic, it gains momentum.⁸

The power, and the danger, of moral panic stem from its collective vehemence, and its pre-hermeneutic motivations. Once the members of Critcher’s five Ps have shaped rhetoric against moral danger, the process unfolds in stages. Erich Goodman and Nachman Ben-Yehuda have defined the stages of the phenomenon as:

Concern that there will be a negative effect on society;

Hostility toward “folk devils,” a new Other;

Consensus that the group in question poses a very real threat to society;

Disproportionality – the action taken is disproportionate to the actual threat posed by the accused group; and

Volatility – moral panics are highly volatile and tend to disappear as quickly as they appeared due to a wane in public interest or news reports changing to another topic.⁹

⁷ Erich Goode, “No Need to Panic?: A Bumper Crop of Books on Moral Panics,” *Sociological Forum*, 15/3 (2000), 543–52 (551).

⁸ Critcher, “Introduction: More Questions than Answers,” in *Critical Readings: Moral Panics and the Media*, ed. Chas Critcher (Maidenhead: Open University Press [2006] 2010), 10–11.

⁹ Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 37–41.

When taken together, these aspects of moral panic can create an intense outburst of media coverage coupled with a governmental and public debate about the nature of the perceived disruption and its putative solutions. The emergence of social media has vastly intensified the white heat of such explosions.¹⁰

The study of medievalisms of moral panic is doubly germane, for it taps not only into the real-world expression of fear, but the historical vocabulary upon which it is based. Moral panic is a concept or abstraction that allows us “to trace similarities between otherwise apparently very different phenomena,” as Critcher has put it.¹¹ It is a phenomenon dependent entirely on socio-cultural context, and thus its expression reveals much about the culture that created it.

Cohen spoke of differential reactions, the many forms that moral panic and the reaction to moral panic took. Based on a variety of demographic factors, there are many panics and many responses.¹² Medievalists have their own differential reaction. To risk simplification, this reaction is “how dare they do this to the Middle Ages?” By engaging in this reaction, medievalists become part of the process. It would be erroneous to claim that the scholarly response is itself a moral panic: Critcher proposes that “the moral panic classification does not imply rational appraisal, considered reaction or appropriate remedies,”¹³ It is clear, however, that the act of engaging with a moral panic on scholarly terms shifts the debate toward a form of argumentation that may seem frustrating and circular. By attempting to remedy flaws in the characterization of the past, medievalists often seem to be speaking in a language that falls upon deaf ears. In pursuing this process, there is a risk of

¹⁰ But also, one might say, shortened their duration and increased the rapidity of the public’s “moral panic fatigue” along with the increased speed of media dissemination.

¹¹ Critcher, “Introduction,” in *Critical Readings: Moral Panics and the Media*, 2.

¹² Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 49–56.

¹³ Critcher, *Critical Readings: Moral Panics and the Media*, 3.

intellectual rigidity and dogmatism. As M. J. Toswell warns us, pursuing authenticity (or historicity) with zeal is a risky endeavor:

Under the guise of being historically accurate, deeply conservative ideas about human behavior can justify themselves as a pretence, a recreation of earlier times. In other words, recreating a “true medieval” experience [.. .] is a highly dubious ethical endeavor.¹⁴

Pugh and Weisl describe the new medieval-esque creation of a “true” medieval’ as something that defeats our analysis: any recourse to the “real” past will fail to explain it.¹⁵ If medievalism is “the continuing process of creating the Middle Ages,” as Leslie Workman describes it, then the influence of the Middle Ages on moral-panic phenomena is itself the influence of modernity upon our perception of the medieval.¹⁶ When these tendencies feed into already volatile popular phenomena, the results can be incendiary.

The life blood of moral panics are powerful and pervasive tropes and idioms, many of them medievalisms. Tropes, as Toswell has described them, “offer ways in which someone engaged in recreating the Middle Ages can do so with a kind of useful shorthand, or can engage in extensive and deliberate research so as to reach for

¹⁴ M. J. Toswell, “The Dangers of the Search for Authenticity?: The Ethics of Hallowe’en,” in *Studies in Medievalism XXIII: Ethics and Medievalism*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 1–10 (9).

¹⁵ Argued in the context of the Iraq war. To cite further, “within the wider cultural imaginary, this sense of the medieval, although very much a reduction of a complex history, takes a baggy historical period loosely defined by geography and with as many diversions as similarities, and turns it into a single entity, a signifier of irrational, violent darkness.” Pugh and Weisl, “Political Medievalisms,” 147.

¹⁶ Leslie J. Workman, Preface to *Studies in Medievalism VIII: Medievalism in Europe II*, ed. Leslie J. Workman and Kathleen Verduin (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996), 1–2.

authenticity.”¹⁷ They are the building blocks of medievalisms, and the tropes discussed below are so pervasive within popular imagination that they have passed from the realm of history into generic standard.¹⁸ Cohen’s notion of the folk devil folds all of pre-modernity into a mixed “medieval” past that bears little resemblance to the world that medievalists study. By reducing history into emotive tropes lacking a concrete medieval or early modern foundation, they eschew notions of accuracy or inaccuracy, and yet still remain powerful. They should collapse under the weight of their inherent ridiculousness – to paraphrase Pugh and Weisl discussing the nostalgic “magic” of the Middle Ages – and yet they endure.¹⁹

In the field of studies in medievalism, we have witnessed an unprecedented variety of social anxieties exorcized through the lens of pre-modernity – its putative qualities and relationship to modernity serving as grist for the mill. When developing the initial research for this paper in 2013, there was no way that I could have anticipated the events leaving a swathe of violence across 2014 and 2015. The Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS, ISIL, IS, or Daesh) emerged, proclaiming a caliphate and provoking a firestorm of reactions and counter-reactions in which the word “medieval” played a key role.²⁰ Claims by the organization to a historically legitimate caliphate were met with accusations of brutal atavistic behavior reminiscent of “medieval” savagery.

Claims of “medieval” savagery have been counteracted by medievalists with the argument that medieval Islam was enlightened and cosmopolitan, and that the

¹⁷ M. J. Toswell, “The Tropes of Medievalism,” in *Defining Medievalism(s): Studies in Medievalism XVII: Defining Medievalism(s)*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 68–76 (70).

¹⁸ Many of these tropes serve as critical terms, as demonstrated by the new volume edited by Elizabeth Emory and Richard Utz entitled *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms* (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2014).

¹⁹ Pugh and Weisl, “Medievalisms: The Magic of the Middle Ages,” in *Medievalisms*, 1–11 (1).

²⁰ This article recognizes that the title of the organization used in the media is contested, and that this is in itself a struggle within the moral panic discourse surrounding it.

Islamic State are thoroughly modern terrorists. As Clare Monagle and Louise D’Arcens have argued in a September 2014 article for *The Conversation*, “when politicians, commentators and indeed terrorists try to get political mileage from using the term ‘medieval’ they should understand that this idea does not align with historical fact. Instead, it is an idea that bears and perpetuates an ideology of othering.”²¹ This terminology describes the process of a moral panic within political and media discourse, the distortion of the past to remedy moral confusion in the present. On *The Public Medievalist* blog, Amy S. Kaufman adds to this debate by highlighting the medievalisms shaped by “Islamic State” themselves, whose “dark dream of medievalism, constructed half by history and half by desire, thrives in our collective imagination and threatens to cast a long shadow over our future.”²²

The cartoonists of Charlie Hebdo magazine were gunned down in Paris by Islamic extremists while exercising an anticlerical attitude, and key pundits suggested that Islam was in need of a “reformation” or an “enlightenment,”²³ implying that the Muslim world exists in a time before modernity, before the cultural changes that made the West “better.”²⁴ The attack on free speech attached itself to images of a time before reason when books were burned, the heterodox were censured or killed, and religion was unassailable. Public figures stoked the fires – a prominent example being

²¹ Clare Monagle and Louise D’Arcens, “‘Medieval’ makes a comeback in modern politics: what’s going on?” *The Conversation*, 22 September 2014, <<http://theconversation.com/medieval-makes-a-comeback-in-modern-politics-whats-going-on-31780>>, accessed 22 June 2015.

²² Amy S. Kaufman, “Dark Revivals: Medievalism and ISIS,” *The Public Medievalist*, 16 October 2014, <<http://www.publicmedievalist.com/dark-revivals-medievalism-isis>>, accessed 15 June 2015.

²³ For an early form of this oft-repeated argument in the British press, see Allan Massey, “When will we see an Islamic Enlightenment?” *The Telegraph*, 21 March 2012, <<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/culture/allanmassie/100061815/when-will-we-see-an-islamic-enlightenment/>>, accessed 15 June 2015. For a powerful refutation in the wake of Charlie Hebdo, see Christopher de Bellaigue, “Stop Calling for a Muslim Enlightenment,” *The Guardian*, 19 February 2015, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/19/stop-calling-for-a-muslim-enlightenment>>, accessed 12 June 2015.

²⁴ *The Guardian*’s Giles Fraser aptly describes this idea as a “secular salvation myth.” See “Our secular salvation myth distances us from reality,” *The Guardian*, 21 November 2014, <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2014/nov/21/secular-salvation-myth-distances-us-from-reality>>, accessed 24 February 2015.

Salman Rushdie, who claimed that “Religion, a mediaeval form of unreason, when combined with modern weaponry becomes a real threat to our freedoms,” and that Islamic State was a “deadly mutation” at the heart of Islam.²⁵ This phenomenon has greatly worried not only the Muslim community, but also the medievalists who find their area of expertise bent to new and unpalatable ends.

Through intense debates that fill our public consciousness, we can ascertain a strong and continuous theme: order is threatened, an explanation is required, and medievalism is a key ingredient at work. The initial impulse resembles what anthropologist Johannes Fabian has termed the “denial of coevalness,” a discursive strategy for placing an object of study in a realm outside of the epoch, sequence of events, and intellectual framework of the present²⁶:

Sooner or later, thinking about memory gets us to consider identity, individual as well as collective, psychological as well as cultural. Not only that, if it is true that recognizing others also means remembering them then we should see relations between Self and other as a struggle for recognition, interpersonal as well as political.²⁷

As Fabian argues, denial of coevalness is a denial of legitimacy, and the process of thinking through the problem allows for remediation to take place. Failure to do so allows unscrupulous members of the five Ps to use the past to frame fear in the present. This was the case in 2011, when latent imaginings of mob unreason

²⁵ Reported by *English Pen* on 7 January 2015, <<http://www.englishpen.org/campaigns/salman-rushdie-condemns-attack-on-charlie-hebdo/>>, accessed 15 June 2015.

²⁶ Introduced in Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, [1983] 2014).

²⁷ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 177.

combined with current affairs to shift a popular discourse and medievalize an already potent moral panic.

The 2011 London Riots: The “Medieval” Mentality of the Crowd

When studied in historical context, popular unrest has a human face. When sensationalized and converted into a form of popular entertainment, it is a ghoulish spectacle. Take, for example, the 1381 London Peasants’ revolt. When studied within the framework of historical analysis, the revolt is a story of post-plague labor shortage, taxation grievance, the popular demagoguery of Wat Tyler and John Balle, and the disquiet of a ruling elite caught in a complex social change. It was not a mindless orgy of violence, but the expression of a radical political agenda that anticipated the French Revolution by four centuries, and would have fundamentally changed the country had it succeeded.²⁸ The result is a dramatic series of violent acts culminating in an ambiguous compromise for peasantry and nobility alike. The same could be said of other incidents of popular unrest from within the medieval peasantry: dramatic, but rooted in political grievance and social unrest.

However, the story transforms into a tale laden with moral panic undertones when the drama of the events of 1381 enter the realms of popular history. Take for example this extract from Dan Jones’ tellingly-entitled *Summer of Blood*:

“*A revell, A revell!*”

²⁸ Juliet Barker, *1381: The Year of the Peasants’ Revolt* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), ix.

No one could forget the noise when Wat Tyler led his ragtag army of roofers and farmers, bakers, millers, ale-tasters and parish priests into the City of London on a crusade of bloodthirsty justice. [.. .] It was as if, thought one observer, all the devils in hell had found some dark portal and flooded into the City.²⁹

This description, lurid and yet still historicist, represents the gateway through which history becomes trope and social grievance becomes moral disruption and deviance. A distortion occurs when history of the revolt relies on the accounts of its contemporary chroniclers, all clergymen and nearly all monastics with little or no sympathy for or understanding of the rebels. Their views were a contemporary moral panic based on fear of a book-burning, bestial, and illiterate mob and anger at a perceived breach of divine order, and yet they are often read as transparent fact.³⁰ They have provided fuel for sensational historical writing, which in turn provides the core tropes and idioms for modern panics. Within the metamorphosis of academic history into popular and purple prose, the events of 1381 found themselves bonded to another very different series of events taking place within the City of London centuries later. The political value of their conflation was not lost on shrewd media pundits.

The Daily Mail published a 30 September 2011 article entitled “The London Riots 1381: The blood-soaked uprising which changed the face of England forever.”³¹ While one could take this article at face value – a discussion of the 1381 Peasant’s Revolt as revealed by the accomplished photo tableaux artist Red Saunders – the

²⁹ Dan Jones, *Summer of Blood: The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381* (London: Harper Collins, 2010), 1.

³⁰ Barker, *1381*, x.

³¹ John Gillingham, “The London Riots 1381: The blood-soaked uprising which changed the face of England forever,” *The Daily Mail* (Mail Online), 30 September 2011, <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2043576/London-Riots-1381-Blood-soaked-Peasants-Revolt-changed-England-forever.html>>, accessed 30 July 2015.

article appears to fit into an altogether more cynical thread of representation by the newspaper. The mob that threatened King Richard II of England in the fourteenth century is revealed in “realistic” detail by Saunders and narrated engagingly by John Gillingham.³² By publishing an article on this topic so close to the London riots, the right-wing *Daily Mail* links the brutal and blood-soaked mob of the photo tableaux to the crude and apolitical mob of popular imagination. A superstitious “medieval” mentality emerges in media analysis, and the tabloid papers fold 1381 into 2011.

The timing of the piece was powerful: the sixth and the eighth of August 2011 saw London rocked by an outbreak of civil unrest that spread through its boroughs, and through towns across England. The initial stimulus was the shooting of 29-year-old black man Mark Duggan in Tottenham by the Metropolitan Police. Following a protest by Duggan’s friends and family and fueled by racial tension and poverty, subsequent copycat events spiraled far beyond the initial stimulus, moving from a civil-rights protest to a riot in a short amount of time. For many, the looting and damage to property was inexplicable and fear-inducing, a sign of “broken Britain.”³³ In the heat of a full-blown moral panic, elements of Critcher’s five Ps defined a discourse based on the vilification of a folk devil, the criminal and feckless underclass. Rather than raise difficult and pressing questions about police treatment of black Britons, public perceptions took a rapid and medievalism-laden turn. The process follows many of the clarifications on the process of moral theory outlined by Yvonne Jewkes in her 2004 criminological analysis of moral panics:

³² Although, as Kenneth Thompson has argued, it is problematic to read cynical and manipulative motives into media reports of moral-panic phenomena – the reporter may very well believe what they write. See *Moral Panics: Key Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1998), 9.

³³ A term originally coined and propagated in approximately 2007 by British tabloid *The Sun* and repeated up by the British Conservative Party. The left-wing paper *The Guardian* has frequently attempted to counter this narrative.

- Moral panics occur when the media turn a reasonably ordinary event and present it as extraordinary;
- The media, in particular, set in motion a deviance amplification spiral, through which the subjects of the panic are viewed as a source of moral decline and social disintegration;
- Moral panics clarify the moral boundaries of the society in which they occur;
- Moral panics occur during periods of rapid social change and anxiety; and
- Young people are the usual target of moral panics, their behavior is “regarded as a barometer to test the health or sickness of as society.”³⁴

In the climate of a Britain shaped by Tony Blair and New Labour’s 90s message of middle-class aspiration, the vilification of the disadvantaged found fertile ground.³⁵ The deviance amplification spiral of discourse was rapid, painting the young and disenfranchised acting in a comprehensible and yet disruptive manner as a symptom of social malaise. Police, politicians, press, and public united around a shared vision of what Chloe Peacock has described as “a ‘sick’ (or, in then-Justice Secretary Ken Clarke’s words, ‘feral’) underclass characterized by greed, irresponsibility, worklessness, laziness, welfare dependence and poor parenting.”³⁶ By reshaping the working class from “salt of the earth” into “scum of the earth,” the popular imagination placed the behavior of the rioters outside of the realm of political action,

³⁴ Yvonne Jewkes, *Media and Crime. Key Approaches to Criminology* (London: Sage, 2004), 67.

³⁵ This process is narrated in columnist and activist Owen Jones’ 2012 book *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (London: Verso Books, 2nd edn, esp. 110–39.)

³⁶ Chloe Peacock, “Remembering the Riots: Citizenship and ‘Social Cleansing’ After the London Riots of 2011,” Unpublished Dissertation, University of Sussex, 4. The dissertation is published online at <https://d19ylpo4aovc7m.cloudfront.net/fileadmin/howard_league/user/pdf/Publications/Remembering_the_riots_web.pdf>, accessed 3 June 2015, having won the 2014 Sunley Prize awarded by the Howard League for Penal Reform. Peacock’s dissertation follows the media reaction to the riots in detail.

outside the normal, legitimate, or comprehensible.³⁷ It painted a picture of degeneracy and behavioral atavism in need of extreme remedies. It pushed the discussion into a space in which we come face to face with medievalism: the brutal realm of the “medieval” mob. The notion of the “medieval” mob – from pitchfork-wielding villagers in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to its comedic portrayal as a trope of mob rule in *The Simpsons* – offers a shorthand for understanding a potentially traumatic disruption of a self-imagined orderly society.³⁸ This stereotyping of mobs as something anterior to and outside of modernity has a history that is rooted in the understanding of medieval people.³⁹

In the shaping of popular imagination of mob violence, a popular belief prevails. There is something atavistic, something dehumanizing, about membership of a crowd or mob. We lose our reason, and descend into something that predates the individual, predates the notion of the enlightened political actors that those in liberal democracies believe themselves to be. Television and Hollywood propagate this belief: any post-apocalyptic landscape is filled with the sound of man becoming the wolf of man, as the classical adage goes. Much of this is owed to the nineteenth-century text *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, a study of the phenomenon by the French sociologist Gustave le Bon. The book argues that “[b]y the very fact that he forms part of an organized crowd, a man descends several rungs on the ladder of civilisation”, that “[i]solated, he may be a cultivated individual; [but] in a crowd, he is a barbarian – that is, a creature acting by instinct.”⁴⁰

³⁷ An apt phrase from Jones, *Chavs*, blurb and passim.

³⁸ The mob appears in *The Simpsons Movie* (2007), but is a recurring trope in the show.

³⁹ The depiction became even more potent when combined with an existing moral panic about “Hoodies,” feckless and violent youths acting out against society as a symptom of a wider social malaise. For a discussion of the “Hoodie” moral panic, see Ian Marsh and Gaynor Melville, “Moral Panics and the British Media – A Look at some contemporary ‘Folk Devils’,” *Internet Journal of Criminology* (2011), 1–21.

⁴⁰ Gustave le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Macmillan, 1896), 13.

Gustave le Bon took his inspiration in this analysis from the French Revolution, a phenomenon fueled by the Enlightenment and yet the incubator of explosive mob violence. We see the seed of the “medieval” mob trope in the same work, for le Bon characterizes the era that came before the Age of Revolutions as a space of un-reflexive moral panic:

The Middle Ages and the Renaissance possessed many enlightened men, but not a single man who attained by reasoning an appreciation of the childish side of his superstitions, or who promulgated even a slight doubt as to the misdeeds of the devil or the necessity of burning sorcerers.⁴¹

Although the popular imagination of moral panic and of the Middle Ages has moved on, this notion has endured. Gustave le Bon and others of his milieu proposed many ideas that are popularly rejected in the twenty-first century – male supremacism, racial profiling, discredited science – and yet the theory of the crowd that he and his contemporaries developed endures. Like the specter of Washington Irving’s Christopher Columbus and his flat world, the trope of a crowd caught in a time before reason continues to haunt popular discourse. The typecasting of the medieval mind as superstitious and lacking in reason makes the mob fit comfortable in a time before Voltaire or Rousseau, making the incongruity of modern mob violence make sense. It is not a breach in modern society, but simply an anachronism. When human minds participate in a mob, they abandon modernity. They return to the age before reason, the Dark Ages of popular imagination. Free from guilt, the putative “medieval” mob mentality exists in an age before self-reflexivity and critical thought. Consequently,

⁴¹ le Bon, *The Crowd*, 115.

the trope follows, we must ask ourselves why this unwholesome medievalism continues to plague us.

By converting the discourse on the riots into a medievalism, the other complexities of the event are merged into an adversarial narrative in which the reasonable and sophisticated population are horrified and repelled by the brutal mob mentality of a group determined to eschew societal norms. Thus, when London Mayor Boris Johnson recently expressed his opinion on the future response to rioters, we hear echoes of 1381 when he advocated that “[y]ou get medieval immediately on these people and you come down much harder, and you don’t allow a mentality to arise of sheer wanton criminality.”⁴²

When Johnson – a member of the English social elite – opined that the government should “get medieval” on those who had threatened his vision of an orderly society, he slipped into the role of feudal overlord punishing his social inferiors. Instead of military backlash, Johnson proposed water cannons and expensive riot gear. By characterizing the motivation of the riots as “sheer wanton criminality,” the ruling elite demonstrate the use of medievalism to provide a clear foe and coherent solution in response to moral panic. The subsequent actions of Critcher’s five Ps followed a similar pattern. The politicians spread a narrative of social degeneracy, and proposed a harsher response in future; the police were authorized (or encouraged) to decisively and aggressively quell future riots; the press entered into a narrative of vilification and highlighted the selfless cohesion of the “good” Britons who helped to clean up after the riots; and the public were polarized by fear of social

⁴² David Barrett, “‘Get medieval’ on rioters, says Boris Johnson,” *The Telegraph*, 29 January 2014, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/10604843/Get-medieval-on-rioters-says-Boris-Johnson.html>>, accessed 23 July 2015.

disorder and the desire to see future outbreaks curtailed.⁴³ The attention of the moral panic was firmly fixed on Johnson's wanton criminals, and the methods by which their "problem" could be "solved."

It is significant and important to note that seemingly similar stimulus events can often have vastly different results. Moral panics require a unique combination of factors in order to grow, and many factors can influence their outcome. A panic can fizzle if there is no clearly identified and commonly agreed folk devil figure or group, if there is no clear reactive course of action to be taken, or if the public does not engage with the message created by media, interest groups, police, or government. Twenty-first-century social-media spaces allow powerful counter-narratives to emerge, challenging hegemonic messages, and rapidly transforming moral-panic discourses. An example of the heterogeneity of scenarios appears in the case of the 2014 riots in Ferguson, Missouri. Rather than transforming into a process of social vilification, the unique socio-cultural environment of a seemingly similar scenario led to a different public debate.⁴⁴ The message that many took from the events surrounding Michael Brown's death was not fear of mob violence, but that of collective self-reflection on the relationship between African Americans and law enforcement officers. The famous twitter hashtag of #BlackLivesMatter could easily have been applied to the events of 2011 in London, and yet a moral panic took a different turn entirely.⁴⁵

⁴³ For further details, see Peacock, "Remembering the Riots."

⁴⁴ Compare this discourse to that of the 1981 Brixton riots, in which the public debate and subsequent Scarman Report focused on the social inequality and poverty of the Afro-Caribbean community, who were subsequently found to be disproportionately affected by the recession of the early 1980s and by inner-city decline.

⁴⁵ A sign of how marked the difference in discourse became in the case of Ferguson can be seen in Darlena Cunha's article for *TIME* magazine, which argued that "Riots are a necessary part of the evolution of society" ("Ferguson: In Defense of Rioting," 25 November 2014, <<http://time.com/3605606/ferguson-in-defense-of-rioting/>>, accessed 13 June 2015).

By linking a “history-ish” understanding of the relationship between mob behavior and social development, the medievalizing of moral panics allows the discourse to eject the object of distrust from modernity, to place it back in the past. As Fabian has argued, denying coevality to imagined folk devils strips them of the legitimacy of articulate modern voices. Popular discontent – often as extreme as civil unrest – over poverty, inequality, or injustice is a threat to the established order when framed within the cultural context of the present. The disconcerting revelations about racial inequality and police brutality revealed by the 2011 death of Mark Duggan were obscured when the media and government message shifted to a vision of the atavistic mob mentality of those trapped outside of mainstream ideologies, a group no different to their fourteenth-century “antecedents.” When caught up in such a debate, the use and abuse of tropes cherry picked from our understanding of the past convert medievalisms into patches placed on ragged holes in a Western society’s positive image of itself. The case-study example of the “medieval” mob mentality is but one of a vast array of related tropes. Think of the headlines of papers: “witch hunt,” “medieval torture,” “superstition,” and so on.

Conclusion

The effects of moral-panic medievalism go beyond the media and permeate the very foundations of popular culture. In 2013, for example, an extremely critical review of Ben Affleck’s film *Argo* revealed that an image of a mob on our screens can never be apolitical. Set during the turmoil of the 1979 Iranian revolution, the film narrates a plot to extract a group of US embassy staff from Tehran using the cover of a film

crew in the country to create the eponymous and fictitious science-fiction film. In the film, there are repeated images of revolutionary Iranian mobs, vast crowds of angry people reduced to a rapacious and inhuman swarm by the film's narrative. Critic Kevin Lee pointed out the disturbing effects of this portrayal:

Instead of keeping its eye on the big picture of revolutionary Iran, the film settles into a retrograde "white Americans in peril" storyline. It recasts those oppressed Iranians as a raging, zombie-like horde, the same dark-faced demons from countless other movies – still a surefire dramatic device for instilling fear in an American audience.⁴⁶

The film's depiction of the mob besieging the US embassy in Tehran is disturbingly similar to a George Romero zombie film. A mindless mob united only by their hatred of America paw at the fences, seeking to form a breach through which they can enter the compound and sate their collective rage. This image, produced almost subconsciously, demonstrates the disturbing conflation of mob violence with social insecurity and cultural distrust.

By eschewing politics in favor of racially-charged monster-film tropes, the film demonstrates the deep-seated fear of mobs within the popular imagination. They exist at the margins of ordered thought and reasoned society, destroying local, national, or international order. These fears move beyond shaping audience reactions to films, feeding into large-scale reactions to public disorder. Within this context, it is unnerving to observe real-life monsters being created out of the massed bodies of

⁴⁶ Kevin B. Lee, "Argo, F--k Yourself: This Year's Worst Best Picture Nominee," *Slate*, 25 February 2013, <http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2013/01/down_with_argo_ben_affleck_s_iran_hostage_movie_is_the_worst.html>, 23 June 2015.

rioters. Ejected from the present and sanctioned from reason, these figures attract tropes, grow in putative and disproportionate threat, and emerge as a fully mature folk devil born from historical, socio-cultural, and xenophobic anxieties.

The reaction of medievalists to moral-panic medievalism can be extremely problematic, and solutions can be tortuous. Experts, disturbed by the abuse of their knowledge, lash out at misconceptions. This reaction, although spirited and erudite, can have little effect on public discourse. Understanding the moral-panic phenomenon explains why. The very comparison of pre-modernity to a Bad Thing (violence, dogmatism, superstition, intolerance) is often invalid. The medievalism has been born regardless of accuracy, and the public will run with it when the circumstances are right. Just like a fire, a moral panic needs fuel to grow and the right climate to spread. Medievalists are not fire fighters, but we can offer the tools for a different discourse. Work such as that of Louise D'Arcens and Clare Monagle demonstrate the power of a new reframing of narrative. By denying the frame of reference (unfamiliar = medieval; medieval = atavistic) that grafts medievalism to moral panic, we can play a role in the public discourse.

Moral panics deploying medievalisms are virulent and repetitive. They are impossible to refute, because they are not amenable to expert counter-argument. That is to say, a medievalist intervening and saying that “the Middle Ages was not like that” only strengthens the link by giving it credence. Fear thrives, and the fearful place a medieval face on their fears. We fear the public and the media misappropriating our subject matter and abusing it, and so we create a new Other. As Julia Kristeva put it, “To each ego its object, to each superego its abject.”⁴⁷ The ethical dimension of the mind forms an image of something unethical, the arbitration

⁴⁷ Julia Kristeva, “Approaching Abjection,” in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 1–31 (2).

of good moral behavior creates an immoral counterexample. The cycle of moral panic is caught up in the cycle of abjection. Only by engaging in a process of meta-cognitive analysis can we apprehend the cycle. As the Peasants' revolt example demonstrates, concepts that flourish unchallenged in the present will shape the future of fear, often for centuries to come.